

# THE NETWORK REVIEW

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## "You don't alter what you know, you alter the way you know it."

### A CONVERSATION WITH WERNER ERHARD about *The est* Training, philosophy, "enlightenment," authoritarianism and legitimate authority, arrogance, leadership, and vision.

*From their base at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, members of the Center for the Study of New Religious Movements have been exploring ways to evaluate the confusing array of activities they define as spiritual, self-development, or consciousness-oriented. A continuing seminar at the Center has worked on criteria which lay people and professionals can use to discriminate between harmful and helpful conditions in groups pursuing such activities.*

*Werner and 17 members of the seminar met in April 1981 to discuss some of the distinctions between authoritarianism and legitimate authority. The conversation covered other topics as well, and the seminar leader, Dick Anthony, later commented that it was "one of the important turning points in our meetings." An edited transcript of the interview is scheduled to appear in a book, *Spiritual Standards for New Age Groups and Therapies*, due to be published next Spring.*

*While *The est Training* is not a therapy or a religion, the conversation between Werner and members of the seminar clearly applies to the issues raised by the book, and to everyday living.*

JOHN WELWOOD: I have questions about whether *The est* Training is a quasi-religious phenomenon. I've known a lot of people who've done it, and I've been impressed with the fact that it helps make their lives more workable. But then there's something else that seems a little bit suspect to me, which is that they seem to have a certain kind of—

WERNER ERHARD: Fervor?

JOHN: Fervor, yes, and also a certain arrogance, as if this were it—as if *The est* Training were everything, including a substitute for any other spiritual practice or meditation, or any kind of transpersonal and transcendental path. I wonder if you could comment on that.

WERNER: It's helpful to recognize right away that the training is not the end of anything, or substitute for another path to some end point. Interpreting it as either of those will skew your assessment of it. At most, the training is a way to examine whatever path you happen to be on; but the training doesn't tell anyone what the path is, or what it should be.

So far, it looks like it's working that way, too. People who take the training haven't

reported to us that they got any kind of end or answer out of it. Also, the research done so far on the results of the training indicates very strongly that results occur over time, that whatever occurs in the training is an ongoing process, and that the only ingredients necessary to keep that process going after the training are the normal, everyday circumstances of life.

The most difficult part of this whole process for some people comes just after they complete the training. And I'll tell you what, in part anyway, makes that so.

I remember the first time I swam underwater with a mask, in water clear enough to be able to see. For three days afterwards, whenever I closed my eyes, I saw what I had seen underwater. I talked about that experience to everybody; it had been very moving for me. Since then, I've had one or two other experiences like that, and I've behaved the same way when they happened. Over time, I'd integrate the experience, and instead of bringing it up all the time, I'd start bringing it up only when it was appropriate. So, I think people's reactions when they first get out of the training are related to that kind of enthusiasm for the experience they've had.

JOHN: Are you saying that what people get out of the training is equivalent to some kind of enlightenment experience, that there are transcendental realizations, and that it's a substitute for what we normally would think of as religious or spiritual goals?

DAVID POWERS



Werner Erhard

WERNER: No. First, I wouldn't say that it's a substitute for anything, and second, I wouldn't say that it's religious at all. I also think most religions aren't very religious. So with

respect to the religion issue, let's talk first about the practices associated with religion, then let's talk about the "truth" of religion.

I don't think that the training has any of the practices of a religious exercise, at least not the way I see religion being practiced. There is no worship in the training, no theological body of knowledge, no particular dogma or code of beliefs to be propagated, and a long list of other differences which, I think, clearly distinguish the training from what we commonly think of as religious practice.

Of course, the practices of religion are not the whole story of religion. There is also the "truth" of religion, the "nature" of it, so to speak. Without getting into a long discourse on what religion provides for people, my assertion is that the training provides a fundamentally different experience from what religion is intended to provide. The training simply provides an opportunity for people to discover, or in some cases recover, their own natural ability to discriminate effectively be-

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WERNER ERHARD  
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tween the different ways that you and I can know and can be.

People express a lot of things in the training, and the training is designed to deal with those expressions so that people can get a different grip on them. For example, a person might find himself or herself operating in life as if they were obliged in some way to respond to something which to them seems real. As they participate in the training, they may discover that this "something" is not a concrete reality at all but is only a memory—recent, distant, it doesn't matter, it's still just a memory. That discovery allows the person to behave appropriately to the "something" rather than inappropriately to it. We call that "completing the experience." What occurs, simply, is a shift in the epistemological domain, from a place where there's no discrimination about something to a place where there is discrimination. What is known is not altered; the way it is known is altered.

So, to answer your question, I'd say that people in the training experience some enthusiasm, which is natural; it happens to everybody—not just in the training—when they have an exciting experience. Nothing pernicious about that. Then there's something like fervor, which can have elements of perniciousness in it; and as far as we can tell, that's a phase through which many people go but in which almost no one seems to get stuck. People seem to go through it fairly quickly, but, unfortunately, with a very high profile. If we had our choice, we'd rather that phase were a little more quiet.



John Welwood

JOHN: What I'm trying to get at is your view of whether or not what people get from the training is somehow equivalent to what in Zen, for instance, would be called enlightenment.

WERNER: Yes, it is. Yes.

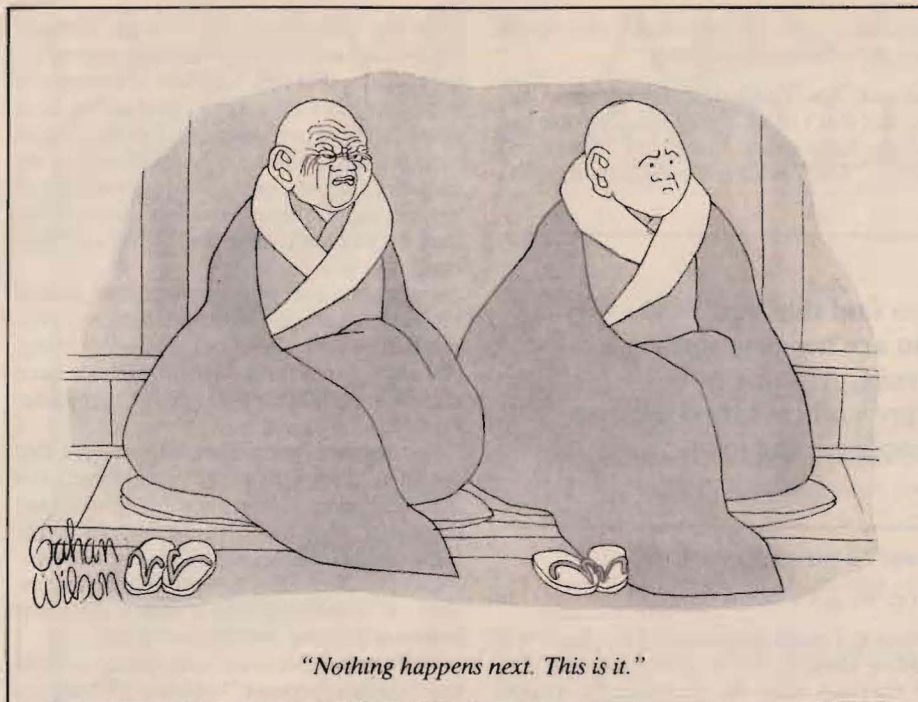
JOHN: It's equivalent. You could get that in two weekends?

WERNER: Yes, it is equivalent, and no, you can't get it in two weekends. If it takes two weekends, you didn't get enlightened. Enlightenment does not take two weekends. Enlightenment takes no time. The two weekends are a waste of time. If we could eliminate those, and just have the enlightenment, we would do that. By the way, I know that lots of people are infuriated by the suggestion that enlightenment is possible without long practice and great struggle. I consider the notion of the necessity of practice and struggle to be nothing more than a notion. It may be a notion borne out by lots of experience, but so was the notion that the earth is flat.

JOHN: Well, the Buddhists, for example, would say that your true nature is enlightened already, but nonetheless, you still have to practice because there's a long path to realization. We can act as though we're enlightened, but there's still some kind of realization that has to happen, over a long period. You can even have enlightenment experiences, but they're not particularly trusted.

WERNER: I agree with everything you've said, and I'm not simply being nice about it. What you said actually reflects my own experience and my own observations. At the same time, I know it's possible to put the end of the process at the beginning, and then do the process.

JOHN: So, just to get it on the record, you are saying that the training does the same thing as the spiritual traditions—



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WERNER: You're not going to trap me into saying that, because that's nonsense. It's the same kind of nonsense that keeps people from realizing that they're already enlightened.

Here's an observation that I know will parallel what you've seen. People are willing to give up anything to get enlightened. You and I both know people who've given up wealth, given up jobs, families, their health—people will give up *anything* to get enlightened. Give up talking, give up sex, give up—you name it, they will give it up. There's only one thing people will not give up to get enlightened. They will do everything they know to hold on to this thing that they will not give up no matter what. The one thing people will not give up to get enlightened is the idea that they're not enlightened. That's the big hold-out, not anything else.

JOHN: In the traditions there's a lot of warning about thinking that you're enlightened, that that's one of the greatest dangers of them all.

WERNER: Discussing enlightenment or thinking about enlightenment is not enlightenment. In fact, we don't talk about enlightenment in the training very much at all. We do talk about it, but not much.

JOHN: I'm wondering why you're avoiding the question of whether this is the same kind of enlightenment that's talked about in the spiritual traditions.

WERNER: Because those who know don't tell, and those who tell don't know.



Dick Anthony

DICK ANTHONY: I'd always heard that the training does seem to claim that it provides something that is the equivalent of enlightenment, and is just as serious an experience, just as

serious or valuable a state as is provided in Zen or Hindu traditions, and I thought that that was implausible, that it must be some kind of exaggeration.

WERNER: Well, I have never said that, nor would I say it.

DICK: But when I went through the training—

WERNER: Nor would I say the opposite was true.

DICK: When I went through the training, the trainer did in fact seem to be saying that. I don't know if that was an eccentric trainer, but in fact, that was my understanding, and it was the understanding of the other people in

the training that I talked to, that this man was telling us that what was happening to us was enlightenment, and was just as genuine an enlightenment as happened in any Zen monastery or up in the Himalayas, and that there were no degrees of enlightenment; it was *enlightenment*. Now, that seems like an outrageous claim to me; much of what goes on in that training seems outrageous to me. Now, if I understand that to be what the claim is, then I don't think that I agree with it.

WERNER: As far as I know, that claim is not made. I appreciate that you were there and I wasn't. I still don't think it was made. The reason I don't think so is that I've listened to many hours of trainers doing the training, and they don't make that claim. At the same time, I do understand how you could come to that conclusion.

But none of that is the point. The point is this: I think that discussions about enlightenment are useless, and I think making enlightenment sacred is even more futile. My question is, what's all this conversation about?

What I'm trying to get across is that the structure of your questions and our conversation doesn't allow for enlightenment. We're not really talking about anything. I don't know how else to respond to you. You can't ask, "Is *this* enlightenment like *that* enlightenment?" That's counting enlightenments. That's nuts! That's truly nuts!

JOHN: Would the training then be a substitute for any other spiritual practice?

WERNER: No! That's craziness, that one thing substitutes for another. In the realm of enlightenment, there aren't substitutions. That kind of mentality can't hold enlightenment.

JOHN: Would there be any value, for example, in meditating and practicing—

WERNER: One of our trainers is a Zen Buddhist. He goes away and spends long times sitting, meditating and practicing.

JOHN: Why would he do that if he's done the training?

WERNER: He would do that *because* he's done the training. Look, can't you hear what you're saying? You keep saying that one thing substitutes for another thing; your notions about enlightenment are all tied up with exclusivity and ideas about "one path" and "if this, then why that?" and ideas that there's someplace to get to. None of that is the way enlightenment works. You need to go back to whomever is talking to you about enlightenment and get them to talk to you about it some more. You're talking about it inaccurately. I'm not kidding. In Suzuki Roshi's book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, he said if

you are enlightened, then you're out doing what enlightens people. Enlightenment is not a stage you reach, and your statements seem to come from the idea that enlightenment is a place you reach. There's no such thing as enlightenment to get to.

JOHN: Where my question comes from is my perception of some people I've seen—

WERNER: The arrogance.

JOHN: Yes, and smugness, like: "We've done it. This is it, you don't need to do any of that other stuff. This is the whole thing."

WERNER: No, no, no, no. I can't imagine anybody saying that they don't need to do that other stuff, since people who've completed the training—we poll them every once in a while to find out what they're doing—report that they *are* doing all that other stuff.

Half the room here has taken the training. Right here in this room are those arrogant people you're talking about. I want to find the person who says to me, "This is the only thing." All I can find are people who say, "I know people who say that this is the only thing." They've got to be talking about *somebody* and I'm trying to find that person. The people in here who have completed the training don't think that it's the only thing. I certainly don't think it is.

**The one thing people will not give up to get enlightened is the idea that they're not enlightened.**

So let me try to answer in this way. The arrogance that you perceive, I think, is there. The degree to which *you* think it's there, I don't think it's there. That is to say, I don't think it's something to be overly concerned about, but maybe that's because I've watched people from the time they get out of the training. I go out of my way to make sure I have interactions with people who completed the training early, in 1971, '72, '73, and '74, just to watch what's happening to those people. I had a gathering in the country to which we invited those people. The result was very interesting. I could remember when those people were talking about the training, and "the training" was every third word. This time nobody even mentioned it. Yes, they looked great; they talked about the things they were doing, and how wonderful things were; but nobody mentioned the training.

It's like the stink of Zen. There's the stink of *est*. The question is not whether the stink exists, but whether it's pernicious and whether it's long-lasting. As far as I can tell, the answer is no to both questions. I keep watching, because there's always the possibility for the answer to become yes.

As to the discussion about the real nature of it, is it really enlightenment—yes, it's really enlightenment. So is sitting in a room. Here. This is enlightenment. You think I'm just saying that. I actually mean it. You think that's some philosophy. It isn't. I think many enlightenment games are pointless because they're all about *getting* enlightened. *Getting* enlightened is a cheat, because the more you do of that, the more the message is that you aren't enlightened. Clearly, the practice is necessary. The practice of enlightenment is necessary, but it can be done from *being* enlightened, rather than *getting* enlightened. When you do the practice from *being* enlightened, then each one of the steps becomes a step in the *expression* of the enlightenment.

JOHN: What's the difference between being "totally enlightened" and just believing that you're enlightened?

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WERNER: The primary difference, technically, is that each exists in a different domain. Believing that you're enlightened exists in the epistemological domain of *belief*. It's totally different from *being* enlightened, which exists in an epistemological domain that I call *abstraction* or *context*. The language structures of belief and the epistemological domain of belief are insufficient to apprehend the domain of context or abstraction. The opposite, however, is not true; the domain of context or abstraction does include the structures of belief.

**P**AUL REISMAN: During The *est* Training, the trainer frequently calls the trainees "assholes." Doesn't calling people assholes tell them that they're not enlightened, or don't you intend it that way?

WERNER: First of all, no, calling people anything doesn't necessarily make any statement about their state of enlightenment. If I call you an asshole in the context of your being enlightened, it enlightens you. If I call you an asshole to get you enlightened because you aren't enlightened, it endarkens you.

None of us understands very much about the power of context. It's useful to distinguish between believing that something is so and its actually being so, because the belief in that thing which is so is totally different from its so-ness. As a matter of fact, the belief that something is so keeps you from *experiencing* its being so. It actually ceases to be so, because you've got a barrier between you and it; and the barrier is your belief that it's so. A belief in the truth is not the truth; yet the same thing, without the belief, is the truth.

JOHN: Maybe it's only the fervent followers who have just graduated, but it seems to me that a lot of people who have taken the training—say *some* of them—have that belief, the *belief* that they're enlightened. How does the training cut through that?

WERNER: Well, first, I'd like to leave open the possibility that some of what you have perceived as arrogance is not, in fact, arrogance. It *may* be, but I want to leave open the possibility that it isn't. Second, although you haven't said it, it is clear you have a very strong belief, *very* strong belief, that people who take the training are not enlightened.

JOHN: I don't know whether it's a belief; it's more a sense that they're on a trip about it.

WERNER: Okay. That's true, too. You have a sense of it. But preceding the sense, before you ever got to have any sense of it, you believe very powerfully and deeply that they are not enlightened, or that it's not possible to be enlightened that way, or some such belief.

JOHN: Well, if we get into the metaphysics of it, then we would have to—

WERNER: No, we don't have to get into the metaphysics; I'm talking about something really simple. You believe that those people are not enlightened and your belief is a matter of fact, not a matter of metaphysics.

JOHN: In the absolute sense, we're all enlightened.

WERNER: Never mind that part of it. I'm talking about the *belief*. You believe that those people aren't enlightened. And that's a very strongly held belief for you.

JOHN: I'm wondering how *est* deals with the fact that people walk around believing that they're enlightened—

WERNER: Oh, I leave room for it, number one. Because they're enlightened. It really is perfectly appropriate if enlightened people happen to *believe* they're enlightened.

JOHN: But you said that belief also keeps them from being enlightened.

WERNER: Yes. That's right; it becomes a barrier, but that's okay. Enlightened people can and do have many barriers. I have many barriers, and I'm clearly enlightened, aren't I?

**You find that you're the way  
you are because you're  
afraid. At some point  
there's a breakthrough and  
people get the joke.**

JOHN: We got you to say it!

DICK: We got it on the tape.

WERNER: I really did a better job when I was kidding about it, but to answer the question the way you want me to answer it—people who complete the training and believe they are enlightened are still enlightened. They are, in addition to being enlightened, simply moving through that specific expression of being enlightened called believing you're enlightened. Believing you're enlightened when you are enlightened is an entirely different phenomenon from believing you're enlightened when you're not.

I know it might not make sense to you, but it is possible that people who have been through the training are actually enlightened, and then, from being enlightened, they may go through the steps of achieving enlightenment. I know you don't believe that. I don't want you to *believe* it. I do want you to allow that it's possible; that when people go through this silly little thing called the training, they actually come out enlightened; and that what you observe afterwards is the process of the expression of their enlightenment. I know you know it's impossible, but I just want you to keep it open as a possibility.

JOHN: They were enlightened already, right?

WERNER: No, no, no, no. They were not enlightened until they got into the training. Now remember, I didn't say that was *true*, I said I want you to entertain that possibility.

By the way, I want you to know that I think that one of the things that makes the training potent is that there are some things in it which are very accurate. If you try to practice medicine with the idea that people are sick because of spirits, you have a certain amount of success; but if you practice medicine with the idea that people are sick because there are microbes and viruses which can't be seen, you have greater success. You see, there's something workable about being accurate, and there's a lot of inaccuracy in life, some of which can actually be made accurate—even by people like you and me, unenlightened people.

PAUL: Would you say something now about what the training is, what it's supposed to do, and how it does it?

WERNER: The training is 60 hours long, done in four days of roughly 15 hours each. The trainers are virtually all people with professional backgrounds, people who are already highly accomplished, in the sense in which society generally considers people highly accomplished. After a person decides he or she is going to be a trainer, it takes an average of two and a half to three years to actually become one. Trainer candidates work at their training all the time—they become immersed—so, in effect, it's more like a five-year program.

I'll briefly describe a few parts of The *est* Training. The first part is designed to let people see that some of the things which they say they "know" to be true, they only *believe* to be true, and that there's a distinction between

what you believe and what's true. The first day is designed to give people an opportunity to recognize that they have lots of pretense in their lives, and that they're pretending they don't. They're pretending, for instance, that their marriage works; or that they want to do the work they do; or that their life works, to say it in general terms, and then on top of all that, they're pretending that they're not pretending at all.

In the first part of the second day, people see that there's a distinction between *concepts* about living and the *experience* of living, and they discover that they have not been experiencing life; they've been conceptualizing life.

For instance, people begin to observe that the idea, "I love my wife," is different from the experience, "I love my wife;" that for the most part, they live with the idea of something and very infrequently have the experience of it. They also discover that the experience of something has a much different outcome than the idea of something.

The last portion of the second day is called the "danger process." About 25 trainees stand at the front of the room, facing the other 225, with the instruction to do nothing but just be there, just standing. While standing there, of course, they begin to notice all of the thoughts, fears, concerns, pretenses, and the like which they carry with them all the time, which have come to be even somewhat automatic, and which seriously impair their ability to be with other people. The people standing there end up doing everything *except* nothing, and in the process they start to see that.

The process is very, very useful for them. It becomes clear to them that they've got an act, a mechanism, a collection of behaviors and actions and feelings and thoughts that may not be who they really are after all. They see it for themselves. It isn't something you're told by someone else. You see it yourself, and it is undeniably clear and undeniably true about you. And it opens up whole new possibilities for ways of being. It reveals a fundamental inauthenticity about our mode of living, and allows for the possibility of authentic living.

After everybody has been up front and has watched everyone else being up front, they sit down and close their eyes. From previous parts of the training they're able to become quickly and accurately aware of what they're experiencing; now what they become aware of about themselves can be frightening, because they realize that what's driving their behaviors is their fear of people.

Macho men find out that they're macho because they're afraid, a discovery they make for themselves. People who are stupid or intelligent or sexy find out that they are stupid or intelligent or sexy because they are afraid of other people. You find out that you're the way you are because you're afraid.

At some point there's a breakthrough, and people get the joke. The joke is that other people look frightening to you because *they* are frightened. The boss is the boss because he's afraid; just like you're whatever you are because you're afraid. In the environment of the training, this becomes a major breakthrough experience for people, and it makes life profoundly different.

One of the things that I think it is very important for you to know is that while we present the training to large groups, it is totally individualized. If there are 250 people in the training, there are 250 different trainings. That's one of the beauties of the training. It's tailor-made for each person. If you are the kind of person who can't handle much emotion, you just don't have much emotion in the training. It's that simple. And yet, it works for you.

Very little of the training is done at you as an individual, and if it is, it's clearly done that way to illustrate some point. In the moment, you might not remember that, but after you sit down it's very clear to you that you have

contributed a useful example for everyone, and the truth of the matter is, it doesn't make any difference whether you stand up or I stand up in an interaction with the trainer; the example is useful to both of us.

The training has acquired a reputation of harshness, and in some cases crudeness. I am not going to say that trainers in the training are not straight and honest with people if they need to be, but the accusations of harshness, crudeness, authoritarianism and the like are largely propagated by people who have not directly experienced the training, and in all these accounts, one thing is always left out: the compassion in the training.

I know—because I'm the guy who trained the people who are leading the training—that the training is done with absolute compassion, and that toughness, when and if it occurs, including calling people assholes, comes from a deep respect for people, from an intention to get straight with them, with absolutely no intention to demean them. As a matter of fact, in terms of results, people are not demeaned; they are enhanced.

The training is done with what might be called ruthless compassion, but it's done with compassion. And it's done with a real sense of the dignity of human beings—not the ordinary social grease called "respect for each other," but a really deep kind of respect, the kind of respect that lets you know you'd be willing to be in the trenches with the person alongside you. It is a really empowering thing to discover that you've been relating to the people you love out of the *concept* of love, and denying yourself the *experience* of love, and sometimes you've got to be very intrusive with people to get that up on the mat. But I tell you, that comes from a respect for them, and a commitment to them.

**The training is done with  
absolute compassion . . .  
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a deep respect for people.**

I want to tell you one thing that I think is kind of funny. I have a constitution that makes going to the bathroom not very important to me. I go to the bathroom about as often as anybody else does, except that if I'm doing something interesting, I just don't go. I was the only person who did the training in the beginning, so the sessions would go on forever, because I never felt like going to the bathroom. People were studying how I was doing the training, and they figured that this not going to the bathroom was a very important part of it. I mean, it's just so stupid, because it's literally that silly—people had those great theories about deprivation and whatnot. Nobody bothered to say, "Hey, Werner, what about going to the bathroom?" I'd have said, "Well, go if you've got to."

I also don't need a lot of sleep, so the trainings would go long into the night. The people in the training needed a lot of sleep, but I didn't. So we trained a lot of people who were asleep during the training, but it works just as well whether you're asleep or awake.

DICK: So you really don't think that those features are an essential part of the training?

WERNER: No.

DICK: That's the window dressing that looks the most authoritarian.

WERNER: Exactly.

JOHN: Why do you maintain it then? Why not just let it go?

WERNER: Oh, in part we have let it go. There's an automatic break every four hours now. We keep doing the training an average of 15 hours a day because if we did it in any

less time per day, it would take more than the four days, which are already a problem for some people.

That should give you some idea of the spirit of the training. I think it would take more time than we want to spend here to describe the whole thing.

By the way, let me tell you something about whether the training is authoritarian. Go into a prison and not be part of the system, and get into a room with inmates where there are no guards, and I want to see you be authoritarian. We've done the training in San Quentin Prison with no guards in a room with prisoners, 250 of them and five of us. And the training works spectacularly. It works just as well in Israel it does in New York City. It works just as well in Davenport, Iowa, as in Los Angeles. It works as well with Harvard professors as it does with—I don't know. What's the opposite of a Harvard professor?

**NEVITT SANFORD:** A Yale professor.

**BRUCE FIREMAN:** Do you think that the people on the staff of Werner Erhard and Associates have the frame of mind in which they can assess your actions, and should your actions be bad for the goals you're trying to promote, that they would get rid of you and carry on the work without you? Are there procedures in place by which—

**WERNER:** They don't need any procedures. They don't need to get rid of me. You see, I have no authority.

**BRUCE:** But could they, if they did need to get rid of you?

**WERNER:** I don't wonder about it. I know that they would do that, and could do that, and as a matter of fact, since the organization's inception they've always had the wherewithal to do it, because I never held any position of authority. I had no formal authority; my power in the organization was exactly equal to my ability to be useful to the people in the organization.

The actual fact about it is that I do have a lot of authority, and I consider the authority to be counter-productive. I don't like authority—it just doesn't work. It's nowhere near potent enough for the kinds of things that I'm interested in achieving.

So we've worked at the job of undermining my position of authority. When you have authority with people, they can't hear you. They can neither hear whether you're saying nonsense, nor can they hear whether you're saying something useful.

So, that's a problem for us, as it is in any organization, and it's a problem that I think we have dealt with. We have forums for people to express themselves; the first "rule" as a staff member is to agree to open, honest, and complete communication. We have structures to support people when they don't feel powerful enough to make those communications. We have an ombudsman who's paid to keep whatever he or she hears in strict confidence, and whose job it is to make sure that a staff member is not damaged by any communication addressed to another staff member.

We don't think that any of those things are necessary, because we don't think we operate in ways that will damage anyone. But we think that it's possible for staff members, when they're looking for an excuse not to be responsible, to say to themselves, "Hey, I can't tell the truth here, because I'll get in trouble." So we've just destroyed the opportunity to use that as an excuse. There's no way that you as a staff member cannot say exactly what's on your mind, because there are so many systems to protect you.

So, yes, I get called to task. I don't get called to task often, because I happen to be able to operate with a lot of accuracy. I also have one other endearing quality. When I make a mistake I get off it fast. Maybe that's not an endearing quality—

**ROGER WALSH:** One of the purposes of this group that's interviewing you is to try to delineate some guidelines for what constitutes beneficent versus harmful groups and teachers. You've been through myriad groups and trainings of one type or another, and certainly met a lot of people claiming to be teachers over the last 20 years. What would you tell us, or what would you tell anyone, about how to differentiate between beneficent and harmful teachers and groups?

**WERNER:** This question is something that I feel a responsibility for, first off because of my own opportunities and the opportunities of my associates, and also because of the larger issue. The whole issue of leadership, authority, etc., seems to me to be a basic problem in our society—any society.

When the source of the authority lies outside of those with whom the authority is exercised, you've got the beginnings of a possible problem. You're not necessarily going to definitely wind up with a problem, but you'd damn well better be careful. See, if Dick is the leader of the group, and is its leader because God has given Dick a mission, and God is not directly available to the rest of us to discuss Dick's designation, that for me is the harbinger of a problem. If Dick's authority is based on anything that is inaccessible to the rest of the people in the group, then I am concerned.

The times when I'm least concerned are when Dick's authority—and then I would not call it authority—is in the hands of the people with whom the authority or power is being exercised, when it's clear to everybody that this is the case. I think you can con people into agreeing with your position of authority, but you can only con them if they don't know that they are the source of your authority. I think that if you're attempting to avoid the evils of authoritarianism, one of the things that should happen is that the people in the group should be very clear that there is no natural leader; that there are people who have natural leadership qualities, but that doesn't make any of them the leader. There is no outside authority which is unavailable to the people in the group selecting the leader; the group is empowering the people who are being empowered.

**When you have authority with people, they can't hear you. They can neither hear whether you're saying nonsense, nor can they hear whether you're saying something useful.**

One of the other things—and this one is a lot more subtle, so I think a lot more dangerous—is the prevailing intellectual level or the prevailing epistemological domain, the realm of knowing that prevails in the group. If that realm of knowing is conceptual—ideas, beliefs, slogans—that for me is almost certainly going to wind up with a problem someplace. If it doesn't, somebody is going to have to be working really hard to make sure that it doesn't become a problem. It's almost a natural disaster.

When I see that conceptualization, though present, exists within a larger epistemological domain that I call *experience*, I'm then a lot more relaxed, because if somebody tries to say, for instance, that Jews are bad, and in the group it's agreed upon that we verify things in our experience, I'm not so concerned that whoever is trying to get that one across is going to prevail. If experience is allowed, and if experience is recognized and respected, then I have less concern.

I begin to have almost no concern when in addition to the domain of concept or explanation and that of experience or process, there is the domain of context or creation. It's a realm in which people look not only at what they think, but at the realm in which their thinking takes place. Attitude is certainly there in this realm, and allowed and appreciated, and a change or process of attitudes is respected, but when the group deals in the epistemological domain of the *context* of attitudes, then I become even less concerned.

**BRUCE:** One of the things that you referred to earlier was that people were too deferent to your authority. That's something that everybody notices, these charges that people are rather slavish in their adulation of you. I want you to talk about the specific changes that you're making that will reduce the excessive deference or adulation.

**WERNER:** We all know that a hundred thousand people can't love one person. If they could, nobody would be able to observe them doing it, because that isn't possible in the structure through which we'd look at the situation. If what's occurring is actually what it's concluded to be—slavish adulation—I want somebody to explain why it nurtures those people, because adulation doesn't nurture people. It only makes them right; it does not nurture them. People who are adulating don't get healthier, they don't get more self-expressive, they don't get more capable. The

people who are supposed to adulate me are healthy, expressive, able, and capable. I'd like to suggest to you that the way you're looking at it is a part of the evil—that you're looking at it in a way that says: "These are the alternatives: pick one."

**BRUCE:** I'm asking you how you're looking at the matter, and what you're doing about it.

**WERNER:** I'm going to get to that.

**BRUCE:** We've had person after person come in here from different groups and tell us about how their relationship with their leader has empowered them—people who were in fact very slavish in their adulation of that leader—they were set on fire; they were "empowered;" they went out and "dealt" with their problems. We've seen this time and time again. Now, in order to accomplish your goals for people, which is that you want them to be empowered and not slavish, you're making changes in your organization. I want to know what problems you see, and how those changes are going to contribute to the relationship between you and your underlings in the organization—

**WERNER:** See, but that's the whole problem.

**BRUCE:** Well, perhaps I'm using the wrong word. But rather than make an issue of my words—

*Continued on page 6*



## R. BUCKMINSTER FULLER

JULY 12, 1895–JULY 1, 1983

INVENTOR ARCHITECT ENGINEER MATHEMATICIAN PHILOSOPHER  
COMPREHENSIVE DESIGNER CARTOGRAPHER POET GLOBAL CITIZEN

By any account, he was an extraordinary man.

By his own account, he was an ordinary man.

*"The only important thing about me is that I am an average, healthy human being. All the things I've been able to do, any human being, or any one, or you, could do equally well or better. I was able to accomplish what I did by refusing to be hooked on a game of life that had nothing to do with the way the universe was going. I was just a throwaway who was willing to commit myself to what needed to be done."*

Could it be that Bucky really meant what he said? Could it be that his life is an unavoidable example that an ordinary person's life can make a difference?

Bucky spoke about living one's life as an expression of commitment. He spoke about living one's life in accordance with certain simple, discoverable principles. He said that by doing so an ordinary person's life could make an extraordinary difference.

Should one take Bucky at his word or dismiss him as a great man being humble?

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WERNER: I'm not making an issue of the words you use. I'm making the system from which the words are derived the problem. Given the system, I can't answer the question. You see, it's not simply the words you're using that are the problem. What I want to convey to you is this: In the assumptions from which you are asking the question, you allow for no truthful answer to the question. The words you use reflect your assumptions accurately, and given your assumptions, there's no solution to the problem. One cannot solve the problem in the system you are using. In fact, that system is the problem.

Now, I'm going to answer your question, because, you know, I came here and agreed to do that, but I want to tell you the truth before I answer the question. So I'm telling you that my answer will make no sense if you listen to the answer in that system from which you asked the question.

The answer is that the organization has for several years been shifting away from a structure that has a central place or a top place from which decisions are made and passed on. We always tried not to operate that way, and over the years we've become more and more successful at not operating that way. The structure of just about any ordinary organization, however, is that way. So when you're trying to go left in a structure that's going right, you can't get very far. We recognized that what needed to happen was what we called a transformation of the structure, because no matter what our intentions were, as long as they were being expressed in a structure of authority, we would not achieve our ends.

The structure we have in mind is a network of people, the center of which is wherever you are. Decisions get made locally. By contrast, if we're all operating as a hierarchical organization, you know, you might be the boss; you'd tell us what to do. We tell you what's going on; you tell us what to do. In a system which is network-like rather than pyramidal, what gets done in any given spot gets decided at the spot. The information flows to there from all over that network, and the information from there flows all over the network.

This is something that I've been studying now for two and a half years, and I actually think we've come up with some breakthroughs. *est* came to an end this year [1981], literally went out of existence, because we're evolving into a network and we wanted to put the old organizational model to bed. So, for instance, the Master Therapist program is done by the entity called Werner Erhard and Associates in a partnership with Dr. Robert Shaw, who's a psychiatrist. Lots of programs are done as partnerships, and more will be done that way in the future, where our network will be affiliated with other networks.

### Errors are important. They're how you get there.

Just let me cover a couple more things very quickly. We started a pilot program in 1981 in San Francisco with a thousand people, a workshop on community in which we've been developing a program to be made available around the country and around the world, so that people in any community can work on the community—make community their business.

The Hunger Project, which was really created by people who have taken The *est* Training but is now much larger than *est* graduates, has two million people who've enrolled.

The Breakthrough Foundation works in international development in rural villages

and urban ghettos, on the thesis that self-sufficiency is never achieved unless there's individual and societal transformation. We feel we've developed a technology that allows people to effect those transformations for themselves, independent of any outside personality.

By the way, many of these organizations are wholly independent of Werner Erhard and Associates.

DICK: That seems like a natural conclusion to that line of questioning. Another line to consider will take a minute to develop. I know people who work for your organization, or in it, and what they seem to have in common is that they work very hard and very long hours, and that they don't have much going on in their lives except *est*. Now, a certain kind of fantasy about *est* gets set off by this fact. It combines with other things I seem to have noticed about *est*: It is a very rapidly expanding organization; it has very high ambitions in terms of wanting to transform the society or perhaps the world; it hopes to be able to end hunger in a certain number of years, and other things that seem implausible from a normal frame of reference; it proselytizes very forcefully, with very great energy. Putting all those things together, it's easy to view *est* as a group of people with a self-involved, very convoluted system of beliefs that achieve their plausibility by the apparent ability of *est* to grow very rapidly.

WERNER: So that growth backs up the belief, appears to back up the belief.

DICK: Yes, so people feel that they're really somehow achieving something important with respect to their own consciousness. Now, what would happen if suddenly *est* peaked, and some of the plausibility structure started to break down? Some of the other groups that we've looked at have really only gotten into trouble when it started to look as if they weren't going to change the world after all, and as if the system that people had been devoting themselves to wholeheartedly for five, ten, or fifteen years wasn't really omnipotent. The whole shared group fantasy started to break apart, and things got crazy. Could you respond to that?

WERNER: I know everybody's trying to be polite, and I appreciate your being nice about it. But, you see, it's not just trying to be polite, and it's not just trying to be nice about it; it's a flat-out lie. And language carried on in lies, even if they're well-meaning lies, leads you to inaccurate conclusions.

What offends me is our willingness to carry on the conversation without getting at the truth of it. I think there's a very big possibility of missing some of the real power and value in the work that we are doing and in the whole development of that work, if you attempt to force it into the categories which you bring to it to try to understand it, because *est* is really about the very nature of your inquiry. The *est* Training is aimed at grasping the categories with which one deals with the world. It's not aimed at what one puts into those categories.

You assume that the long hours and the high commitment of staff members must be brought about by some great vision. I deny that that's true. That isn't why I work long hours. I'm very committed—I say "committed" and I know the thought that goes through people's minds: "He believes in what he's doing." I don't believe in what I'm doing at all. I have absolutely no belief in what I'm doing. I already know how it's going to turn out. I know it's going to turn out exactly as it turns out. It's been doing that for eons.

So you say, "But then, Werner, what's your motive, what the hell are you working all those hours for?" I'm not motivated. There isn't any motive. There's no damn vision motivating me. You know, if I stopped doing it tomorrow, it wouldn't make one bit of difference, and if I keep doing it right to the end, it won't make any difference. The only thing

that's going to happen is what happens.

Now, that doesn't fit into our structure, into our categories. We know that you don't get up in the morning unless you've got a motive. That's a great explanation. Maybe you can explain people's behavior, but you can't do one thing to bring an ounce of wholeness and completeness into people's lives with that theory, because the theory is essentially a theory of explanation and doesn't get at the cause of things.

### Motivation? It doesn't bring an ounce of wholeness or completeness into people's lives because it's essentially . . . explanation and doesn't get at the cause of things.

So I don't have a vision. I'm not selling some ideal. I don't know where I'm going. I know where I'm coming from. And I think that the people on the staff know where they're coming from. I think it's a great excitement to them to discover where that takes them, day by day, week by week. It's why we don't have any problem throwing things out. See, if my life is about where I'm going to get to, and you make me change, then you've upset me. If my life is about where I'm coming from, change is no problem—if I'm starting at the end, and going then through the process, instead of going through the process to get to the end.

So why do people work long hours? They work long hours because there's work to be done, and doing the work is very satisfying. I didn't say it was easy, or pleasant; I said it was satisfying. They work long hours because in that opportunity they experience the opportunity to make a difference. Not to make things different, see, but to make a difference. They experience the opportunity of being able to be useful—and they don't experience that opportunity in a lot of places in the world.

DICK: You're saying, I think, that *est* people won't flip out and get crazy if the world isn't transformed, because they don't have a certain point of view about how the world is going to be transformed; they don't have a belief structure that has to be confirmed.

WERNER: That's right.

DICK: I think that's valid. I think that that is a difference between *est* and some of the other groups that we've seen.

WERNER: The other thing is that they don't think they're "good;" therefore, they're not made crazy by somebody saying they're bad. I don't think The *est* Training is good. I don't think it's righteous. I don't think it's God's work. God is not talking to me personally any differently than She talks to everybody. You know, there's no great mission. Or, yes, there is a great mission, but it's the great mission everybody is on. We have no private access to the mission and no special knowledge about the mission.

By the way, before *est* I was an expert in motivation. In the realm of motivation experts, one measures expertise by income. Given my income, before *est*, I was an expert in motivation. That was my business. At one time, I was fairly clear. I was one of the few people in the country who knew what motivation was. I knew it "up on the line"—my income depended on being able to teach it to people. Ultimately motivation is counterproductive, because inherent in it is the message that you're not. It teaches you that you're not, and it reinforces that you're not. Even achieving that towards which you were motivated just seals the fact that you're not.

So, for example, if you examine intelligent people—particularly people who wear their intelligence on their coat sleeves—and you get down underneath it, you find invariably that they are intelligent to avoid being stupid. Invariably, when intelligence is not nurturing, it is a device for overcoming something, it is a motivated kind of intelligence. In my experience and in my observation, intelligence is a natural expression of self. One's self is intelligent.

I don't mean that we should throw all motivation out, because motivation is useful as an interim device, as something through which to go, something to master. But ultimately motivation is a true exercise of authoritarianism. Our whole society is based on it, and I say that people are not freed by the values of this society, or ennobled by them; they're dominated by them. I think it's pernicious to start with; you don't need to get to Jonestown. It's already pernicious. And nobody is really teaching anybody about the science and the technology and art of coming from.

The thing which is really difficult—and we notice this a lot in the work that we're doing in development around the world—is that people cannot believe that there is something that moves people other than motivation. There's just no possibility of ontology being behind it. That is not held as possible. Therefore, if you see somebody moving, by God, they've got to be up to something. They've got to be moving towards something. It can't be that they're just moving.

PHILIP ZIMBARDO: Doesn't The Hunger Project have a vision?

WERNER: Yes. I suggest that if you read what we call the "source document" for The Hunger Project, you would see both that what I've just said is true and that they have a vision—the vision doesn't preclude what I just said.

The Hunger Project's mission is to create a context for the end of hunger. Now, to do only that would be half-assed, if you will. Therefore, you have to face up to also creating a goal, the end of hunger; but it's the context which is The Hunger Project's job, and in the context "the end of hunger," what is the expression of the end of hunger. Therefore you don't fail, in the context.

PHILIP: But you could fail in that vision.

WERNER: Yes. You can fail and—no, you know you will fail in the objectives. One hopes not to fail ultimately, but one knows one will fail in the objectives. That's a part of the expression of a context of succeeding. In the context of succeeding, failure is contained; therefore, failure is not invalidating. Failure doesn't destroy anything. As a matter of fact, it forwards things. Errors are important. They're how you get there. Mistakes are the path.

I'll tell you the one thing that burns our people out. It's when they think they got it. It starts to happen at exactly that moment when they figure they have it made, they have it together, they understand it now. And it's so deadly, it's really sad. They may go on to be very successful, but their success never has the quality of making a difference again.

JOHN: Do they come out of it?

WERNER: Some do. The jury's still out on some, and I think some won't. And you see, it's very clear to me that everybody will. So I'm now talking in that context. Maybe this time around, some won't, but ultimately we all will.

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